

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE **A-1**

NEW YORK TIMES
15 MARCH 1981

U.S. CHALLENGES VISIT BY TOP MILITARY MEN FROM SOUTH AFRICA

VISAS ARE FOUND 'MISLEADING'

5 Officers Said to Cloak Identity in
Applications — They Prepare
to Leave the Country

By BERNARD GWERTZMAN

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, March 14 — Five senior South African military officers arrived in Washington this week under what one Administration official called "misleading circumstances." They were preparing to depart tonight after the State Department raised questions about their status.

The whole matter is being treated very cautiously by the Reagan Administration. A State Department spokesman was under instructions late this afternoon to do no more than confirm that the officers had been here and say that an investigation was under way to determine how they were able to enter the country.

There has been a longstanding policy against allowing high South African officers to visit the United States on official business. In the past, some have come as guests of Americans sympathetic to South Africa, Administration officials said.

Less Hostile Relationship

A reason for the extreme sensitivity seems to be that many of President Reagan's supporters have advocated a less hostile relationship with South Africa. Mr. Reagan himself has recently made some conciliatory-sounding statements about the South African Government.

The State Department would not make public the names of the five officers, but it was learned independently that one of them, a Brig. Gen. van der Westhuizen, is head of military intelligence. Another was identified as Admiral Du Plessis. First names were not available on either. The surnames are common in South Africa.

The following account has been confirmed by the State Department, and independently by other Administration officials:

The five officers applied for diplomatic visas through the American Embassy in Pretoria without identifying themselves as military men. The South African Foreign Ministry was said to have asked that they be given visas to consult with the South African Embassy in Washington. On their applications they did not list their ranks nor did their Government passports indicate they were officers.

Upon arrival in Washington, they were said by Administration officials to have met some members of Congress through the auspices of individuals favoring an improvement in relations between the United States and South Africa.

One Administration official said that the American Security Council, a private group that espouses conservative views, played a role. It was not possible to reach any officers of that group by telephone this afternoon.

An appointment was made for the five military officers to meet with a senior State Department official who was not identified, but shortly before they were to arrive at the State Department yesterday, the African Bureau of the department discovered who they were. When they entered the lobby of the department they were told that the appointment had been canceled.

Subsequently, the department learned that one of the group paid what was described as "a courtesy call" on an official at the Defense Intelligence Agency at the Pentagon and on a staff officer at the National Security Council.

When the State Department raised the matter of their status with the South African Embassy this morning and asked when they were leaving, it was told that they were leaving tonight to return to South Africa. The embassy had no comment.

Some officials were upset at the developments because the South Africans seemed to be trying to initiate contacts through military channels at a time when future policy toward South Africa is one of the most sensitive questions facing the Reagan Administration, given traditional American opposition to South Africa's apartheid, or racial separation.

There was concern at the State Department that the visit not be interpreted as having been initiated by Washington. Officials insisted that it had not occurred with the advance knowledge of the Administration.

But the trip of the five military officers occurred at a time when some African specialists have been led to believe that the Reagan Administration intends to take steps to improve ties with the South African Government. The Carter Administration had very chilly relations with South Africa and imposed a total ban on all military sales to that country because

of its apartheid policy of race separation.

The Carter Administration was also very concerned about the possibility of South Africa developing nuclear weapons.

Mr. Reagan, in an interview with Walter Cronkite broadcast by CBS News on March 3, said that there had been "a failure" in the United States to "recognize how many people, black and white in South Africa, are trying to remove apartheid and the steps that they've taken and the gains that they've made."

"As long as there's a sincere and honest effort being made, based on our own experience in our own land, it would seem to me that we should be trying to be helpful," the President said.

Mr. Reagan asked: "Can we abandon a country that has stood beside us in every war we've ever fought, a country that strategically is essential to the free world? It has production of minerals we all must have and so forth?"

"I just feel that, myself, that here, if we're going to sit down at a table and negotiate with the Russians, surely we can keep the door open and continue to negotiate with a friendly nation like South Africa," he concluded.